

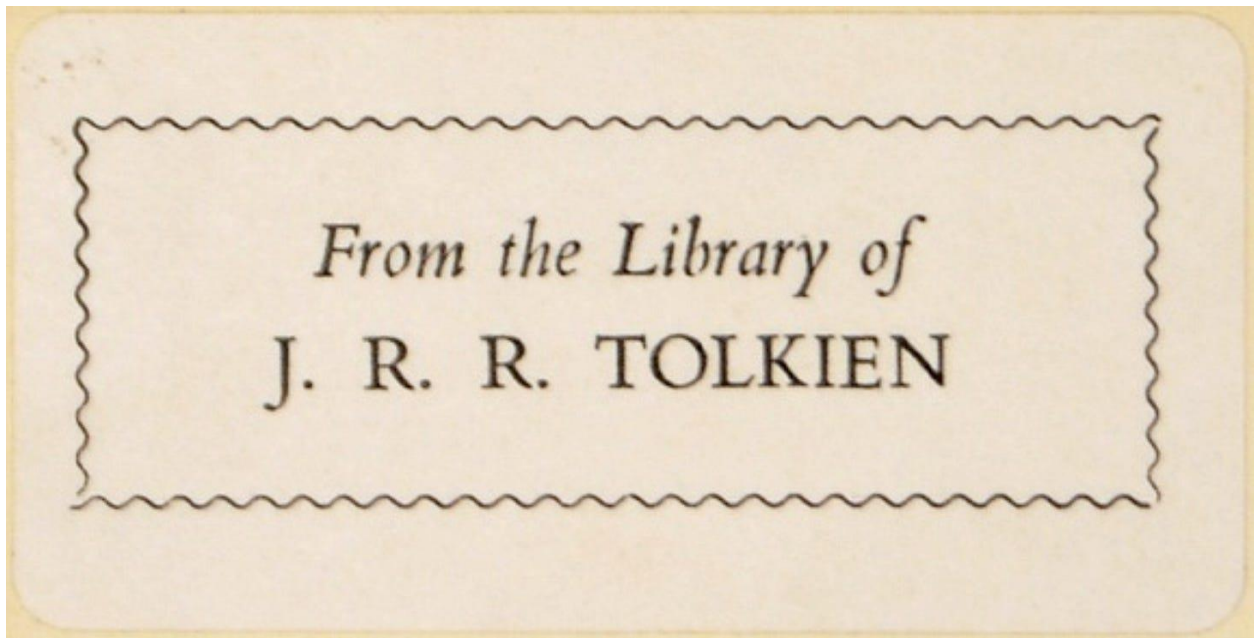
# The Writing Hut

## Ex Libris: The Joy of Bookplates

*A nice addition to your own volumes as well as the best way to trace the books Jane Austen browsed*

[Alex Johnson](#)

Jul 14, 2026



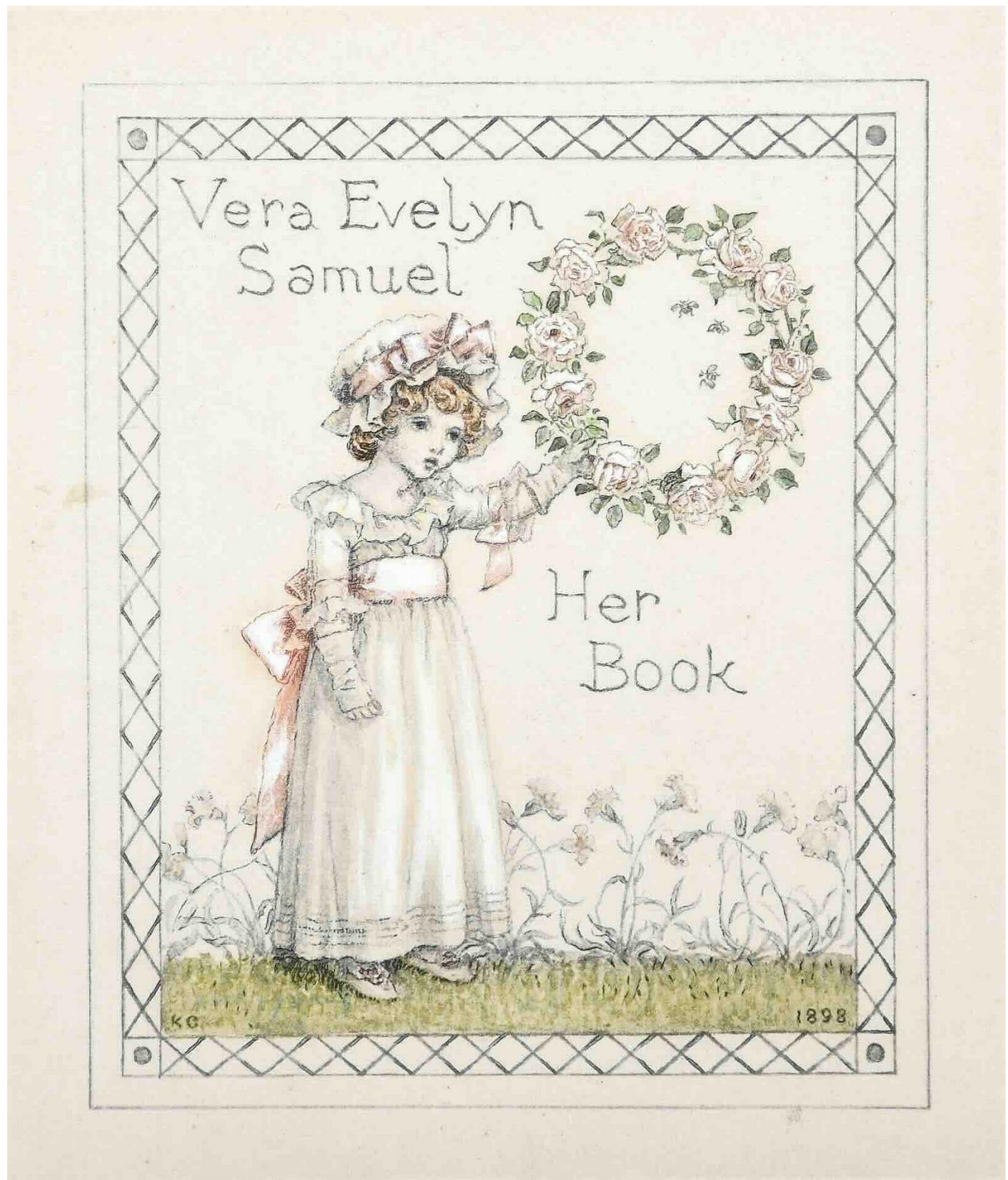
Perhaps the most intriguing part of a book is an element that readers add themselves, something that increases its aesthetic value while also offering an insight into the history of the volume and the personality of its owners, the bookplate.

So while the 1479 first edition of Platina's *Lives of the Popes* sold by Christie's in 2021 for \$18,750 is of obvious interest in itself, the story of that volume is augmented since it comes with the bookplate of its contemporary German Renaissance humanist owner Willibald Pirckheimer

(1470-1530) which was designed by Albrecht Dürer, *plus* a later bookplate designed by Pablo Picasso for its 20<sup>th</sup> century owner, art dealer and book collector Alexandre Rosenberg (Picasso also designed bookplates for Vice President of the United States Nelson A. Rockefeller).

Indeed, the bookplate's history is almost as long as the printed book itself, the first recorded examples dating from around 1470-80 belonging to German monk Hilprand Brandenburg of Biberach (an angel with a shield decorated with an ox). And interest is strong in the 21<sup>st</sup> century; last year the Sylvan Cole Gallery in Sitges, Spain, successfully put on The Bookplates of Benito Mussolini exhibition, and this spring Queens College, City University of New York has held The Bookplate: Imprints and Impressions celebrating the bookplate's history.

They are also collectible in their own right. The Victorian illustrator Kate Greenaway was also a fine bookplate designer and Peter Harrington is offering the only original artwork by her printed in colour for a client for £3,000. Greenaway's usual charge for a bookplate was around £5 and she worked on this one using ink, pencil and watercolour on and off for more than two years.



Early bookplates were very much a mark of rank utilised by their proud wealthy owners, usually featuring their coats of arms (such as diarist Samuel Pepys), but by the end of the

18<sup>th</sup> century more varied motifs had emerged, sometimes depicting visual plays on the owner's name, or simply using books, libraries, flora, and fauna as an attractive emblem.

"Today, leading Chinese and Japanese printmakers create multicolour woodcut bookplates, while artists in Eastern Europe and Russia produce mezzotints and aquatints," says James P. Keenan, Director of the American Society of Bookplate Collectors & Designers ([bookplate.org](http://bookplate.org)) and author of *Bookplates - The Art of This Century: An Introduction to Contemporary Marks of Ownership*.

"The tradition of exchanging ex libris prints dates to the 1890s. Our mission is to assist booklovers with their bookplate designs and promote printmakers' talents through exhibitions and publications, strengthening this global community. Furthermore, you can commission custom bookplates from top artists in person at congresses."

James has more than 125 different ex libris bookplates in his name but describes himself as a small player in the field.

"In comparison, several aficionados have commissioned hundreds of different bookplates to represent various collecting interests within their libraries or simply to be used for exchange. For example, Ichigoro Uchida who is a professor of English at a college in Tokyo has over 500 different bookplates in his name, designed by top artists worldwide. Mario de Filippis, a restaurateur from Arezzo, Italy, has commissioned more than 3,000 different bookplates! These are exceptional cases, most collectors commission only a few."

At the most basic level, bookplates show who owns a book – a civilised step up from the medieval curses that rained down destruction on anybody considering pinching a signed book - and that's what makes it particularly useful for those in the rare book world, especially those following a trail or establishing provenance. "Though pleasingly there seems to be a resurgence of book curses on contemporary plates and you can find lots of examples on places like Etsy," says Dr Eleanor Baker, author of the recent excellent compendium *Book Curses*.

Indeed the identification of non-bookplate user Oscar Wilde's personal library has been possible only because of the bookplates that other people stuck into the copies they bought at his bankruptcy auction. After his death, Oxford butcher Stanley Revell bought a large part of J. R. R. Tolkien's library to which he added a self-adhesive 'bookplate' of his own design - 'From the Library of J.R.R. Tolkien' (pictured top) – and which he sold to fund his actual collecting interest, the work of poet T. S. Eliot.

"Tracing provenance is an important aspect of my job," says Sophie Floate, rare books cataloguer for five colleges at the University of Oxford, "and bookplates are invaluable in this

respect. That said, it can still be problematic tracing the actual person since some bookplates are not very explicit in naming such as cypher-style or monogram bookplates.”

A perfect example of how useful bookplates can be is the work being done by Jane Austen scholars Deb Burnham (owner of Bygone Books) and Peter Sabor (Professor Emeritus at McGill University) on her brother Edward Austen Knight’s library at Godmersham Park in Kent, England. Their hard work has resulted in the marvellous online catalogue Library of Godmersham Park ([www.readingwithausten.com](http://www.readingwithausten.com)) where you can virtually explore the shelves in the library as Jane would have done, and read what she would have flicked through or borrowed when she paid her brother a visit.

Their fine work is ongoing thanks to The Godmersham Lost Sheep Society (GLOSS), a scholarly group which is looking to track down the remaining dispersed volumes.

“It is fascinating to find these books all over the world, most in the US, many in the UK, and others found in Australia and elsewhere,” says Deb Barnum. “Sometimes, people email to say they have a book with the family bookplate, the most recent a gentleman in Germany whose father collected books on Africa. The 12-volume set he had all had the MGK bookplate and they had been in the 1818 catalogue of the Godmersham library and we were able to raise the money to purchase them. A fabulous find!

“Working on this project these past nine years has been very rewarding but there are also disappointing stories. A gentleman contacted me to say he had various book covers with the family bookplates on the front pastedown, but just the covers, no books! So these are lost to us.”

Bookplates can even help open up previously closed avenues of research. “There have not been as many female book collectors as their male counterparts,” says Deb, “but the study of women owning books has of late taken on scholarly dimensions and it is fascinating! Bookplates are also a way to find this history - if a woman had a bookplate, she likely had a private library of some consequence.”

*A version of this article appears in the latest issue of [Fine Books & Collections](#) magazine where you can also look at [some of its readers’ bookplates](#).*